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ABSTRACT

This study polled 300 parents of New York charter school students to gauge the degree of parental satisfaction with charter schools. Data from telephone interviews indicated that parents were extremely satisfied with the work of their charter schools in almost every aspect of schooling. Their assessments were particularly striking when asked to compare the charter to the school their child attended prior to attending a charter school (usually a standard public school). About 42 percent of parents gave an overall grade of "A" to the charter school, compared to only 21 percent who gave an "A" to the prior school. Over half of the parents gave their charter schools an "A" for quality of instruction, and 28 percent gave them a "B." Nearly all of the parents were satisfied with school safety, parent-teacher relationships, amount and quality of homework, class size, academic quality, discipline, and communication from school personnel. Most parents re-enrolled their children in the same charter schools. More than 9 out of 10 parents said their children's charter schools had no problems with carrying guns on school property, gang activity, drug use, or destruction of school property. (SM)

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Civic Report

No. 37 June 2003

What Parents Think of New York's Charter Schools

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with a Preface by

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CENTER FOR CIVIC INNOVATION
AT THE MANHATTAN INSTITUTE

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Executive Summary

This report presents the results of a poll of 300 parents of New York charter school students, performed by Zogby International for the Manhattan Institute. It is the first attempt to accurately gauge the degree of parental satisfaction with charter schools, and to explain their consistent popularity in New York.

The report shows that parents in New York are extremely satisfied with the work the charters are doing in almost every aspect of schooling. Their assessments are particularly striking when asked to compare the charter to the school, usually a standard public school, that their child attended prior to enrolling in their charter school.

The report's main findings are as follows:

- Parents throughout New York State indicate high levels of satisfaction with their child's charter school. 42% gave their charter school an "A" grade overall compared to only 21% who gave their child's prior school an "A."
- 51% of respondents say their charter school deserves an "A" for its quality of instruction, and 28% say it deserves a "B." Only 4% gave their charter school an "F."
- When judging the individual components of charter schools, 90% of parents were satisfied with the safety of the schools, 87% were satisfied with parent-teacher relationships, 86% with the amount and quality of homework and 85% with class size. 84% of parents were satisfied with the schools academic quality, and 81% were satisfied with discipline and communications from school personnel.
- 79% of parents re-enrolled their children in the same charter school for the current school year. Those who didn't were usually those who did not have to or couldn't, because their child graduated or the family moved to another town for example.
- More than nine in every 10 parents say there is no problem at their child's charter school with carrying guns on school property (94%), gang activity (93%), drug use (93%) or destruction of school property (91%).
- When asked what one thing their child's previous school did better than the charter school, by far the most common response (33% of parents) was "nothing." When asked what one thing the charter school did better than their child's previous school, the most common response (17%) was "better academics/education."

About the Authors

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The Manhattan Institute would like to acknowledge the many people who helped make this poll possible. Joseph Reich, creator of the Beginning with Children and Community Partnership charter schools and a Manhattan Institute trustee, started this project with a suggestion that CCI do some original research on charter schools. Sy Fliegel and Harvey Newman of CEI-PEA were instrumental to this project from the start, helping to originate the specific idea for a poll and then helping to persuade charter schools to participate. James Merriman of the New York Charter Schools Institute, and Jonathan Gyurko and Iris Zvi of the New York City Department of Education's Office of Charter Schools were also instrumental in explaining the poll's purpose to charter school operators. Lisa Coldwell O'Brien and Bill Phillips of the New York Charter Schools Association worked hard to communicate with charter schools and solicit their cooperation. Sara Asmussen, Julie Goodyear, Margaret Harrington and Mimi Corcoran were also very helpful in this regard. Most of all, the Institute would like to thank the principals and directors of those charter schools who chose to participate, making available phone numbers for parents with children enrolled in their schools. Without their cooperation, this poll would have been simply impossible to produce.

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Preface

When the charter school movement started over 10 years ago, at its heart was the concept of increased autonomy in exchange for higher levels of accountability. Many interpret accountability as a relationship between the school and oversight agency. However, the real line of accountability is between teachers, students and parents. For the real "customers" in the choice system of public charter schools are not educrats; they are students and parents.

In this report, for the first time, we can measure how well the charter movement in New York State has lived up to this commitment to accountability. What we see is that charter schools are highly accountable schools that respond to the concerns and needs of students and parents. They are creating educational environments where students and parents continue to choose charter schools over other public schools. The data bear this out:

- Parents in charter schools are twice as likely to give the charter school an "A" grade overall than the school their child previously attended.
- 58% of parents met with their child's teacher four or more times a year, and a majority reported that the teacher *contacted them* to discuss their child's academic performance four or more times throughout the school year.
- When asked what one thing their child's previous school did better than the charter school, by far the largest number of parents said "nothing."

The *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001 mandates that students attending chronically low performing public schools be given the option to transfer to higher performing public schools. Brilliant in concept, the Act has been difficult for school systems to implement simply because there are not enough quality public schools available for student transfers. As a result, parents feel that they are being denied their rights and are demanding that school systems act quickly to create more quality public schools.

As this study shows, the answer to the dilemma is clear: create more public charter schools. Currently, there are more than 2,700 charter schools in operation across the nation, but only 38 in New York State and just 18 in New York City. With parents of children in charter schools testifying to such high levels of satisfaction, it is obvious that chartering agencies and officials should increase the number of charters both in New York and across the country.

Charter schools have proven their ability to serve students from all socio-economic backgrounds and geographical environments. They are a widely effective reform strategy capable of serving students from low to high-income brackets, those considered "at risk" as well as high performing students, students from all racial and ethnic backgrounds, and students with special needs such as English language learners. They involve parents in the educational process, thus making the crucial link between what goes on in the school with what goes on at home. In short, charter schools are proving that education based on real accountability leads to achieving the bottom line of education: ensuring that children learn, grow and prosper.

Harvey Newman
Director, Charter School Technical Assistance Center, CEI/PEA

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What Parents Think of New York's Charter Schools

INTRODUCTION

Parents throughout New York State indicate high levels of satisfaction with their child's charter school. They are twice as likely to give the charter school an "A" grade overall and for its facilities than the previous school their child attended—and 65% of parents say their children were previously enrolled in a public school. More than half of respondents say the charter school deserves an "A" for its quality of instruction.

When judging the individual components of charter schools, an overwhelming majority of parents says they are satisfied primarily by the safety of the schools, followed by parent-teacher relationships, the amount and quality of homework and class size. Academic quality, discipline and communications from school personnel also receive very high rates of satisfaction.

Four-fifths of parents told us they re-enrolled their children in the same charter school for the current school year. The most frequent comments from those who did not do so reported that their child graduated, did not have to re-enroll or the family moved to another town.

More than nine in every 10 parents say there is no problem at their child's charter school with carrying guns on school property, gang activity, drug use or destruction of school property.

Parents are pleased by the frequency of parent-teacher conferences and instances where charter school teachers contacted parents to discuss their child's academic progress—a majority says this occurred at least four times a year.

When asked what one thing their child's previous school did better than the charter school, by far the largest number of parents said "nothing." In addition, when parents responded to the question, "what was the one thing that your child's charter school did better than the school he or she previously attended," they were most likely to say, "better academics/education."

Even in the midst of these glowing recommendations, charter schools are not entirely perfect. More than half of the respondents believe there is a small problem, somewhat of a problem or a large problem with classroom disruptions. Just under two in five parents do not perceive a problem at all with classroom disruption.

Behavior/discipline was the second-most frequent response to the question about what the child's previous school did better than the charter school. Likewise, parents were apt to say the charter school did "nothing" better than the previous school, or the previous school had "better teachers/instruction" and "better communication with parents."

A small number of individual parents who did not re-enroll their children in their current charter school objected, for example, to the charter school that seemed "like a daycare for lower-class children," the "long school year," or "too many substitutes (teachers)." This is more likely a concern with a particular charter school than charter schools as a whole entity.

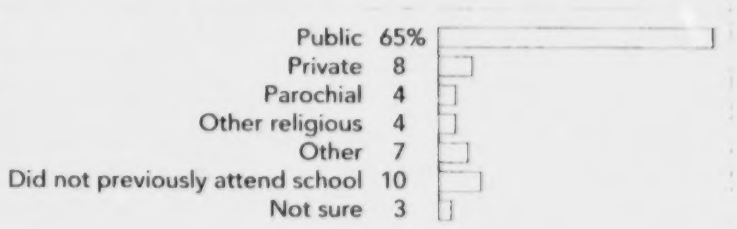
POLL QUESTIONS AND RESULTS

This section presents the wording for each question and the aggregate results.

If you had more than one child enrolled in a charter school last year, please answer the following questions, only thinking about the eldest.

2. In what type of school was the child enrolled just before enrolling in the charter school?

Two-thirds of respondents (65%) say their children were enrolled in public schools before enrolling them in the charter school. Eight percent had their children enrolled in private schools; 4% were enrolled in parochial schools; another 4% in other religious schools, and 7% in other types of schools. For one in ten, their children did not previously attend any school.



3–8. For each of the following, use a grading scale of A, B, C, D, or F.

3. *Your child's charter school*
4. *The facilities of your child's charter school*
5. *The quality of instruction at child's charter school*
6. *The school that your child attended just before you enrolled him or her in the charter school*
7. *The facilites of that previous school*
8. *The quality of instruction at that previous school*

More than two-fifths of parents give their children's current charter school an overall grade of "A" (42%), while another one-third gives the charter school a "B" (33%). Just more than one in seven give it a "C" average (15%), with 7% grading it below average at "D," and 3% giving it a failing grade of "F."

In comparison, parents are only half as likely to give the school previously attended an overall grade of "A" (21%), while the amount of "B" grades given to the previous school are nearly equal (30%) to that of charter schools (33%). People are fifty percent more likely to give a grade of "C" to the school their child was enrolled in previously (23%) than to the current charter school (15%). The previous schools are also more likely to receive a "D" (9%) or "F" grade (9%).

A majority of respondents gives the quality of instruction at their child's charter schools an "A" (51%). Charter schools are also twice as likely as the schools the children previously attended to receive "A" grades for their facilities (42% to 20%, respectively) and quality of instruction (51% to 23%). "B" grades are nearly equally awarded to charter schools and the previous school, although more parents give a "B" grade to facilities at both types of schools than to the quality of instruction.

Previously attended schools are much more likely to receive "C" grades for their facilities (21%) and quality of instruction (23%). More parents also give "D"s and "F"s to the quality of instruction and the facilities at the previous schools.

A majority of white parents (56%) feel their child's charter school deserves an "A" grade overall, compared with 35% of African Americans. Similarly, 49% of those in New York City give their school an "A" compared to 39% upstate.

One-fifth of parents are inclined to give an overall "A" rating to the school their child *previously attended* (21%). This is true in all three geographic regions of the state, and among both African American and white parents.

Most whites (69%) and respondents in New York City (63%) give an "A" to the *quality of instruction* at their child's charter school. Slightly less than half (46%) of Upstaters agree. 41% of blacks give the charter school an "A" and one-third think it is a "B".

Parents are evenly divided between giving their child's *previous school* an "A", "B" or "C" grade concerning the *quality of instruction*, with a plurality of 29% awarding a "B". Whereas 51% of parents of children enrolled in charter schools give the school an "A" for quality of instruction, just 23% gave this grade to their child's previous school. This is consistent among those living Upstate and in New York City, and among whites and blacks.

Table 1. Grading Charter Schools and Previous Schools (%)

	A	B	C	D	F	Not sure
3. Your child's **charter school**	42	33	15	7	3	—
6. The school that your child attended just **before** you enrolled him or her in the charter school	21	30	23	9	9	8
4. The facilities of your child's **charter school**	42	37	13	4	2	1
7. The facilities of the **previous school**	20	37	21	8	6	8
5. The quality of instruction at your child's **charter school**	51	28	11	5	4	1
8. The quality of instruction at the **previous school**	23	29	23	11	5	8

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9–15. How satisfied were you with each of the following at your child's charter school—very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, somewhat dissatisfied, or very dissatisfied?

9. *Safety*
10. *Parent-teacher relationships*
11. *Amount and quality of homework*
12. *Class size*
13. *Academic quality*
14. *Discipline*
15. *Communications from school personnel*

Respondents show very high rates of satisfaction for all aspects of the charter schools their children attend. The parents show the highest satisfaction with safety in the schools (90% very or somewhat satisfied), followed closely by parent-teacher relationships (87%), amount and quality of homework (86%), and class size (85%).

The highest rates of dissatisfaction come from less than one in five parents each for communications from school personnel (18%), discipline (18%), and academic quality (16%).

Table 2. Satisfaction with Aspects of Charter School
(ranked by % satisfied)

	Satisfied*	Dissatisfied
Safety	90	10
Parent-teacher relationships	87	12
Amount and quality of homework	86	13
Class size	85	14
Academic quality	84	16
Discipline	81	18
Communications from school personnel	81	18

**Satisfied combines very and somewhat satisfied; dissatisfied combines very and somewhat dissatisfied.*

Close to nine in 10 parents in all sub-groups say they are very and somewhat satisfied with *safety* in their child's charter school. An overwhelming 97% of parents in New York City agree.

Parent-teacher relationships elicit the second-highest level of satisfaction with charter schools (87%). Whites, Hispanics and those in the $10,000-$14,999 income group are very pleased (94% average).

Parents are also pretty satisfied with the *amount and quality of homework* in their child's charter school (86%). There are no significant differences between regions or education levels.

Most parents are satisfied with *class size* in charter schools, including more than half who say they are "very" satisfied (56%). Hispanics and New York City residents are very and somewhat satisfied (94% average).

New York City parents, whites and Hispanics are the most likely to say they are satisfied with *academic quality* at their child's charter school (90% average).

Parents strongly feel the charter schools are safe, and they are very satisfied with student *discipline* (81%). Those in New York City (88%) are more satisfied than Upstate parents (78%), while Hispanics (100%) are more satisfied than whites (84%) or blacks (78%).

Those who are satisfied with *communications from school personnel* include respondents in New York City (88%), and Hispanics and whites (90% each).

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16–20. How serious a problem was each of the following in your child's charter school—a large problem, somewhat of a problem, a small problem, or no problem at all?

16. Carrying guns on school property
17. Gang activity
18. Drug use
19. Destruction of school property
20. Classroom disruption

More than nine in ten parents say that carrying guns on school property (94%), drug use (93%), destruction of school property (91%) and gang activity (93%) present no problem at all in their children's charter schools.

Classroom disruption is the only one with which respondents saw a problem in the charter schools. One in six say it was a large problem (16%) and one in five say it was somewhat of a problem (20%). Overall, though, more than half say classroom disruption was only a small problem (24%) or no problem at all (38%).

Upstate parents clearly have a different perception than New York City parents of *classroom disruption*. One-fifth of Upstaters say there is a large problem in the schools and 23% feel it is somewhat of a problem. Another 23% say it is a small problem and one-third believe there is no problem.

In contrast, 29% of those in New York City see classroom disruption as a small problem and 45% say there is no problem. More than one-fourth of whites (26%) see somewhat of a problem. Although 62% of Hispanics (sample size 13) do not see a problem, whites (31%) are less likely than the average respondent to agree.

Table 3. Problems at Charter School (ranked by % no problem)

	No problem	Large problem	Somewhat a problem	Small problem	Not sure
Carrying guns on school property	94	2	0	1	3
Gang activity	93	2	1	2	2
Drug use	93	1	1	2	3
Destruction of school property	91	2	2	2	2
Classroom disruption	38	16	20	24	2

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21. How many times a year did parent-teacher conferences occur at your child's charter school?

22. How many times a year did teachers contact you with regard to your child's academic progress?

Approximately three-fifths of respondents say that both parent-teacher conferences (58%) and teacher contact regarding students' academic progress (60%) occurred four or more times a year at their children's charter schools.

One in five parents say that parent-teacher conferences occurred three times a year (19%), while one in six say they took place twice a year (16%). Only 4% say they were held once a year, and 1% say they never occurred.

More than half of the parents in all sub-groups reported having *parent-teacher conferences* at least four times a year. Parents with some college education (26%) were more likely to recall having three conferences a year.

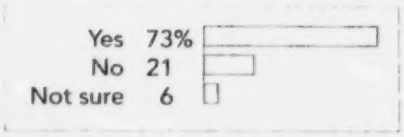
A majority of parents say *teachers contacted them* at least four times a year with regard to their child's academic progress. Those in New York City are slightly more likely than Upstate parents (64%–57%) to say there were four contacts.

Table 4. Frequency of Contact

	Once	Twice	Three times	Four or more	None	Not sure
Parent-teacher conferences	4	16	19	58	1	2
Teachers contact you	2	12	13	60	11	3

23. Did your child's charter school notify you when your child was sent to the office or otherwise disciplined?

Close to three-fourths of respondents (73%) say their child's charter school notified them when their children were sent to the office or were otherwise disciplined. One-fifth (21%) say the schools did not notify them.



More than three-fifths of parents in all sub-groups say the charter school *notified* them when their children were disciplined. Among the most likely to have been notified are 83% of New York City residents. African Americans (77%) and Hispanics (76%-sample size 16) are more likely than whites (63%) to say they were notified.

More parents in New York City (83%) than Upstate (70%) report being notified when their child was sent to the office.

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24. What, in your opinion, was the ONE thing that your child's previous school did better than the charter school?

33%	Nothing
7	Behavior/discipline
4	Better instruction/teachers
8	Not sure

In comparison to the charter school, more than one-third of parents say that the school their child previously attended did nothing better.

25. What was the ONE thing that your child's charter school did better than the school previously attended?

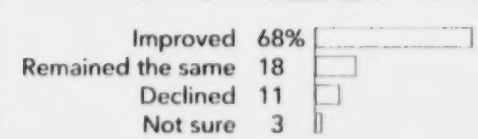
Parents are most likely to say that the charter schools provide a better education and academics than did the previous school. Half as many say the charter schools supply better communication with parents or better teachers and instruction. More than one in ten, though, say nothing was better at the charter school.

17%	Better academics/education
13	Nothing
9	Better teachers/instruction
9	Better communication with parents
6	More one-on-one with students
5	Everything
7	Not sure

26. What was the most important reason for choosing to enroll your child in this charter school?

30%	Academics/better education/ More math, reading, science
11	Smaller class sizes
10	Dissatisfied with public/previous schools
7	Thought it would be better
3	Not sure

27. Since enrolling in the charter school, do you feel that your child's academic performance has improved, remained the same, or declined as compared to their performance in the previous school?



Two-thirds of respondents (68%) feel that their children's academic performances have improved since enrolling in the charter schools. Close to one in five (18%) feel their children's academic performances have remained the same, while 11% feel that academic performances have declined in comparison to the previous schools.

Greater than 60% of people within most sub-groups feel their children's academic performance has *improved* when compared to their performance in the previous school. This includes approximately three-fourths of New York City residents and Hispanics.

African Americans (14%) were slightly more likely than the average respondent to feel their children's academic performances *declined* after enrolling in a charter school.

28. Would you recommend this charter school to other parents?

Four in five overall (80%)—and vast majorities in most subgroups—would recommend their children's charter schools to other parents, while 17% would not.

Yes	80%
No	17
Not sure	3

Whites (88%) and Hispanics (95%) are among the most likely to *recommend* their children's charter schools to other parents.

African Americans and men are slightly more likely (21% each) to say they would *not recommend* their charter school.

29. Does the child that you enrolled in the charter school have a learning disability?

Approximately one in six respondents (17%) have children with learning disabilities enrolled in charter schools. Most do not (83%).

Yes	17%
No	83

30. How well did the charter school serve this child's needs—very well, somewhat well, not very well, not well at all?

More than three-fourths (77%) believe the charter schools did well in serving the needs of their children with learning disabilities. More than half (55%) say the charter schools served these needs very well. One in five (20%) say the charter schools did not serve these special needs well.

There are no significant deviations from the average among those who say the charter schools did well. The sample sizes of those who felt the charter school did *not* serve their children's needs well are too small on which to comment.

Well	77%
Very well	55
Somewhat well	22
Not well	20
Not very well	4
Not well at all	16
Not sure	4

31. Did you re-enroll your child in that charter school for the current school year?

Four-fifths of respondents (79%) say they re-enrolled their children in the same charter school. One in five (20%) did not re-enroll their children.

Yes	79%
No	20
Not sure	1

New York City parents were more likely than those Upstate, 85%–76%, to say they *re-enrolled* their children in the same charter schools for the current school year. All 12 respondents in the suburbs also enrolled their children again.

32. Why Not?

5%	Child graduated/school did not go to the next grade
2	No reason/not sure

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Appendix

Methodology

Zogby International conducted interviews of 300 parents of children in New York State charter schools, chosen at random from a list provided by the Manhattan Institute. All calls were made from Zogby International headquarters in Utica, N.Y., from Friday, January 10 to Saturday, January 11, 2003. The margin of error is +/- 5.8%. Margins of error are higher in sub-groups.

The list was comprised of phone numbers of parents with one or more children who attended a New York State charter school during the 2001-02 school year. Principals and chairs of each school's board of trustees received multiple letters, emails, and telephone calls during the summer and fall of 2002. These communications explained the poll's purpose and requested their school's participation.

The Institute received lists of parental phone numbers from nineteen of the thirty-one charter schools enrolling students during 2001-02. Over 5600 students were enrolled at these schools, representing over 70% of the total charter school enrollment of about 7500 students. Participating schools were Bronx Prep; CNY Math & Science (Syracuse); Charter School for Science & Technology (Rochester); Community Partnership; King Center; Merrick Academy; New Covenant; Reisenbach; Roosevelt Children's Academy; Sisulu Children's Academy; South Buffalo; John V. Lindsay Wildcat Academy; Ark Community; Beginning with Children; Charter School for Applied Technologies (Buffalo); Genesee Community; Carl Icahn; Stepping Stone Academy; and Tapestry.

Schools were asked to provide only parental phone numbers; parental names, children's names, and addresses were not requested. Once these numbers were received, they were placed in one master list and all duplicate phone numbers were eliminated. Only this unduplicated master list was provided to Zogby International. Parents receiving calls were selected randomly from this list.

Sample Characteristics

	Frequency	Percent Valid
Sample size	300	100
Upstate	213	71
Suburbs	12	4
New York City	75	25
Less than high school	12	4
High school graduate	58	19
Some college	100	33
College graduate+	130	43
White	72	24
Hispanic	21	7
African American	181	61
Asian/Pacific	—	—
Other/mixed	23	8
Did not answer race	3	—
1-parent household	117	39
2-parent household	181	60
Other parent household	2	1
1 child in household	75	25
2 children	117	39
3 children	58	19
4 children	29	10
5 children	12	4
6 or more children	9	3
English at home	291	97
Spanish at home	4	1
Other/both languages	4	1
Not sure of language	1	0
Less than 1 yr. at residence	17	6
1-3 years at residence	87	29
3-5 years at residence	44	15
More than 5 yrs. at residence	150	50
Not sure length at residence	2	1
Employed outside/inside home	243	81
Unemployed	30	10
Student	8	3
Retired	8	3
Less than $7,500	14	5
$7,500–$9,999	7	3
$10,000–$14,999	20	8
$15,000–$24,999	59	22
$25,000–$34,999	50	19
$35,000–$49,999	53	20
$50,000–$74,999	38	14
$75,000 or more	23	9
Did not answer income	36	—
Male	43	14
Female	257	86

** Numbers have been rounded to the nearest percent and might not total 100.*

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